



SUCCESS STORY

Healing Rites Promote Returns in Northern Uganda



An Acholi elder performs cleansing rituals before the reburial of remains found in Paicho Sub-County.

USAID/Uganda



The women of Paicho dance to celebrate the return to their land after more than 20 years of conflict.

USAID/Uganda

January 2009 – The women of Paicho Sub-County danced in jubilation after Acholi elders reburied bones as part of a ritual cleansing ceremony they believe will pacify angry spirits.

With peace returning to northern Uganda after two decades of violence perpetrated by the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the ritual helps to cleanse the area so people can more freely return.

For many, going home has been difficult, as the disinterred remains of civilians—often family members—and combatants serve as constant reminders of the violence the region has endured. Until human remains are found and removed, people are reluctant to cultivate fields where atrocities took place.

A series of reburials officiated by traditional Acholi leaders working with USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives began in December 2008. To date, 12 such cleansing ceremonies have been held in Gulu and Amuru districts, and more will follow in Pader and Kitgum. These four districts make up Acholiland, which bore the brunt of the LRA conflict.

"Reburial and cleansing of villages is one of the activities to ensure a smooth resettlement of internally displaced persons," said Sophie Agwoko, speaking for the Ker Kwaro Acholi, the cultural chieftaincy of the Acholi.

The ceremonies are an integral part of the resettlement process in northern Uganda. They provide a form of traditional psycho-social support to reassure residents that it is safe to return and fields can be safely cultivated.

"To the community, it is an indication that the war is coming to an end, and builds hope and confidence for people returning to their villages," Agwoko concluded.

This is why the Paicho women were excited. The burial ceremony held a particular significance. Spirits of the dead had been appeased, and now they and their families had been given a real opportunity to return home.